



Employee eco-initiatives and the workplace social exchange network



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test a workplace social exchange network model of employee eco-initiatives in which high-quality relationships with the organization, the supervisor, and the co-workers, influence suggestions for constructive change toward the environment. Data were obtained from 449 university-educated Mexican employees working in the service industry. In contrast with recent research, we found that social exchanges with the organization and the supervisor were not linked to eco-initiatives, at least not directly, when controlled for social exchange with the coworkers. However, the results indicate that the quality of peer relationships mediates influences of the broader social and psychological context represented by the organization and the supervisor. These findings and their implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The organizational behavior literature has extensively examined employee-centered social exchange relationships. This emphasis stems from theoretical and empirical knowledge on expectations of reciprocity (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007). According to social exchange theory (e.g., Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960), reciprocity-based relationships have implications for behavior, and foster positive work attitudes and performance (Cole, Schaninger, & Harris, 2002; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The most studied foci of exchanges are the organization and the supervisor. Research has shown that both organization- and supervisor-directed social exchanges predict employee outcomes, including but not limited to, in-role and extra-role performance, innovation, and withdrawal behavior (see,

e.g., Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997).

Social exchange relationships have also been examined at the work group or coworker level, providing similar findings as regards value-creating employee attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Bishop, Scott, & Burroughs, 2000; Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010; Pearce & Herbig, 2004). However, this focus of analysis has received less scrutiny and remains, surprisingly, largely underexplored. For example, Banks et al. (2014) have emphasized that “as organizational forms become flatter, greater research attention must be shifted toward horizontal, peer relationships” (p. 288). Or, perhaps more importantly, research should more systematically try to capture the holistic social exchange dynamic that unfolds in the workplace between an employee and (a) the organization, (b) the supervisor, and (c) the work group (Chiaburu, Lorinkova, & Van Dyne, 2013; Neff, 2008). According to Cole et al. (2002), all three of these exchanges not only contribute individually, but simultaneously, to the explanation of positive work outcomes “as part of a workplace social exchange network” (p. 143).

One of the main assumptions of the workplace social exchange network is that an employee's dyadic social exchanges with the

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organization, the supervisor, and the work group, are partially inclusive (i.e., complementary in nature). These three social exchange domains do not exist in isolation. Individuals in organizations are often involved, to different degrees, in several vertical and lateral exchange relationships that are interrelated, or nested within each other (Cole et al., 2002; Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2009; Schaninger & Turnipseed, 2005). To look at only one or two forms of exchange, as much of the research does, provides an incomplete picture of the social exchange dynamic that exists in the workplace. Employee outcomes are likely to be determined by all three domains of exchange, at the interplay of organizational, supervisor, and coworker influences (Chiaburu et al., 2013; Cole et al., 2002; Neff, 2008; Schaninger & Turnipseed, 2005).

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to test a model of workplace social exchange network on employee initiatives as regards a pressing issue, that is, environmental protection in the organizational context. The importance of understanding employees' engagement in ecological initiatives (hereafter eco-initiatives) has been highlighted in the corporate greening literature. According to Boiral (2009), irrespective of the management systems in place, employee eco-initiatives play "a crucial role in preventing pollution and promoting corporate greening" (p. 225). Because of the diversity, complexity and contingent nature of environmental issues (Ones & Dilchert, 2012, have identified more than 3000 critical environmental behaviors and activities in the workplace), corporate greening most often relies on the tacit knowledge, helping relationships and collaboration of employees (Boiral, 2002; Gattiker & Carter, 2010; Hart, 1995; Theyel, 2000), thus justifying a more systematic consideration of eco-initiatives in both research and practice.

By exploring a workplace social exchange network model of employee eco-initiatives, this study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it explores the three main social exchange domains experienced by individuals in organizations in a holistic and inclusive, rather than an isolated or mutually exclusive manner (Cole et al., 2002; Neff, 2008; Schaninger & Turnipseed, 2005). This is in line with recent meta-analyses that show that different social exchanges do not necessarily result in differently targeted reactions (Banks et al., 2014; Chiaburu et al., 2013). On the contrary, research has found that organizational, supervisor, and coworker support shape employees' social context and have an added effect on work outcomes such as, for example, creative performance and innovative behavior (Chiaburu et al., 2013). Second, following recent developments in social exchange theory, we made the assumption that social exchange with peers would be the most influential to promote positive employee behaviors, especially due to the flattening of organizational structures and to the number of interactions that coworkers develop with each other on a day-to-day basis (Banks et al., 2014; Bentein, Stinglhamber, & Vandenberghe, 2002; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Neff, 2008; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). Our results support this view, and highlight the importance of coworker influences as part of employees' social context. Last, this study is the first to explore the cumulative effect of multiple social exchanges on a specific type of change-oriented citizenship behavior—employee eco-initiatives—that transcends and extends beyond the organizational boundary to reach the wider community, and eventually, the society at large.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical background of employee eco-initiatives and workplace social exchange is presented. Next, the research hypotheses are developed. The methodology and results are then reported. Finally, the implications of the paper are discussed in the context of the organizational behavior and corporate greening literature.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Taking eco-initiatives

Because of the many environmental problems caused by organizational activities (Stern, 2000), companies are increasingly pressured to reduce their environmental impacts. A strategic way for companies to do this is by leveraging employee behavior (Hart, 1995; Lülfs & Hahn, 2013; Ramus & Killmer, 2007). The key role of individuals in pollution prevention, waste management, and resource conservation has long been established in the corporate greening literature (e.g., Hanna, Newman, & Johnson, 2000; May & Flannery, 1995; Ramus & Steger, 2000). Nevertheless, research on workplace pro-environmental behaviors has not been conducted in a systematic fashion. Only recently have researchers tried to identify and study employee green behaviors on a large scale, resulting in the development of a comprehensive taxonomy called the 'Green Five' (Ones & Dilchert, 2012).

The Green Five Taxonomy by Ones and Dilchert (2012) is based on the analysis of more than 3000 activities that was obtained from a large spectrum of jobs, organizations, and industries in the United States and Europe, and aims to encompass the whole range of employees' actions that impact the natural environment. It proposes a framework of workplace green behaviors under five main analytical categories: conserving (i.e., reducing use, reusing, repurposing, and recycling), working sustainably (e.g., changing how work is done), avoiding harm (e.g., preventing pollution), influencing others (e.g., encouraging and supporting others), and taking initiative (e.g., initiating programs and policies). However, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and Ones and Dilchert have stressed that 'taking initiative' comprises an instrumental set of actions describing "how employees go about initiating and promoting environmentally relevant behaviors that might, based on their content, fall into other categories" (p. 99, emphasis in original). In other words, individuals who take initiative at work can serve as change agents whose actions can be directed at activities such as reducing resource consumption (i.e., conserving), developing greener products (i.e., working sustainably), or improving end-of-pipe pollution control (i.e., avoiding harm).

The concept of eco-initiative was formally introduced by Ramus and Steger (2000), and defined as "any action taken by an employee that she or he thought would improve the environmental performance of the company" (p. 606). Eco-initiatives are discrete, individual behaviors that can occur at any organizational level and depend on employees offering innovative ideas and making suggestions to improve the situation. According to Ramus and her colleagues (Ramus, 2001; Ramus & Killmer, 2007; Ramus & Steger, 2000), employee eco-initiatives are a proxy for eco-innovation and contribute to corporate greening in three main ways: (a) by decreasing the environmental impacts of the company, (b) by solving environmental problems, and (c) by creating more eco-efficient products or services. As highlighted by Ramus and Killmer (2007), eco-initiatives thus display aspects of 'taking charge', i.e., behavior that is voluntary and intended to effect organizationally functional change (Morrison & Phelps, 1999, p. 403).

Eco-initiatives often take the form of (change-oriented) organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and entail employees' investment of time and energy toward environmental improvement (Boiral, 2009; Daily, Bishop, & Govindarajulu, 2009; Lülfs & Hahn, 2013; Ones & Dilchert, 2012; Smith & O'Sullivan, 2012). Taking eco-initiatives is about the advancement of the green agenda, putting environmental interests first, and suggesting news ideas. There is, more often than not, a discretionary aspect to employees' initiatives toward the natural environment, which require

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